

The Days After

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Summary: PostBecoming II fic. The gang in Sunnydale copes without Buffy.

1. Default Chapter Title

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This is a post-"Becoming" fic. I know, two seasons too late. What can I say? I'm a late bloomer.

Xander rushed out of the house, practically dragging Giles with him. He wasn't sure if Giles was still conscious, but he was sure that the Watcher was in a bad way. Giles's fingers were bloody and looked broken, his body seemed bruised and exhausted, and, from what he had said before being rescued, Xander thought that the librarian must have gone through some horrible ordeal.

But at the moment his attention was divided between his concern for Giles and his growing concern for Buffy, battling Angel alone in the old mansion. He desperately wanted to go back and check on her, but from the looks of Giles that would be impossible. Unless, of course, he left the librarian outside while checking inside, in which case Buffy would probably kill him if Giles sustained any further damage. Xander swore softly. He had no choice but to keep dragging Giles along.

"It's gonna be okay, Giles," Xander murmured. "I'm gonna get you to a hospital, okay?"

Giles gave a barely perceptible nod. Xander slowed down for a moment, feeling the Watcher's forehead with his broken arm. He pulled his hand back with a curse. Giles was feverish. Xander looked around desperately for a pay phone.

"Yes! Score one for the X-Man!" he cried as he spotted one on a

nearby corner. He laughed in relief, painfully aware that he sounded half-hysterical. He gently leaned Giles against the walls of phone booth, quickly dialing 9-1-1.

"Hello? I've, uh, got a medical emergency here. I'm on the corner of Crawford street and Main....One of my teachers has been hurt pretty bad, he's got a fever and he's bleeding, too. He's gonna need an ambulance. Okay, thanks." Xander hung up the phone and turned to Giles.

"It's cool, Giles," Xander told him. "I've got an ambulance on its way."

"Good," Giles mumbled, obvious pain in his voice. "Now, get back to Buffy."

"No way. She told me to get you to safety, and that's what I'm going to do. Besides, I'd probably just get in the way, distract her." He realized suddenly that this was probably true. That didn't make it any easier.

The ambulance arrived about ten minutes later. Giles was lowered into a stretcher, given some medicine for his fever, and bandaged crudely as they loaded him into the ambulance. Xander was graciously allowed to ride up front.

"So what happened?" the driver asked. "To your teacher there. He looks like he's been pretty beat up."

"Yeah," Xander said. "He was. The--the guys who attacked me and my friends at the library earlier--who killed Kendra--they kidnapped him and...beat him up. I went out looking for him and found him lying in an alley."

"Really?" The driver arched an eyebrow but didn't question further. Xander glanced out the window, back towards the mansion.

(Buffy,) he thought miserably, (I hope you're okay.)

* * * *

Willow lay in her hospital bed, semi-exhausted after casting her spell. She glanced sideways at Oz, who was sitting in the chair beside her bed.

"Do you think it worked?" she asked him. Oz shrugged.

"Dunno. Hasn't been too long."

Willow nodded, tired enough to be satisfied with that. She looked up at Cordelia, who was pacing nervously by the door.

"What's taking Xander so long?" Cordy murmured, genuinely worried. She turned to Willow and Oz. "You don't think he got turned into something icky, do you? Or got hit on by some vampire girl? He likes dangerous, creepy things."

As if on cue, Xander burst into the room.

"Xander!" Willow exclaimed. "Where's Buffy? And Giles?"

"You mean she's not here?" Xander looked upset.

"We thought you were watching her," Willow replied.

"I had to get Giles out," Xander said. "So I--I had to leave her. I just got back here in the ambulance with Giles. He's in a room just down the hall."

"Is he okay?" Willow asked anxiously.

"I think so," Xander said. "He's a little out of it still, but that's because he was feverish and they gave him some drugs that conked him out. Some--some of his fingers have been broken, and he's got a bunch of bruises all over. I think the doctor said that one of his arms was nearly broken, and he's got some cuts on his back and chest. And..."

"And?" Willow pressed.

"When I saved him, he mentioned something about Drusilla getting inside his head," Xander said. "It had him kinda freaked."

"Can we see him?" Willow wanted to know.

"You'd better stay in bed, Will," Xander said. "You're still looking a little pale."

"But I want to see Giles!" Willow said. "I'm resolved. See my resolve face?"

"Oh no, not that again!" Xander said. "I'm falling for that one again!"

"I'll see if I can get a wheelchair." Oz kissed Willow's hand and walked off. Xander stared after him, pouting a little.

"So, when you last saw Buffy...was she okay?" Willow wondered. "Did Angel look different? 'Cause I cast the spell, and I think it worked and..."

"Last I saw, the Buffster was killing things with a big ol' sword," Xander said. "And Dead Boy was still lean and mean."

Just then, Oz came back in with a wheelchair. Smiling tenderly at Willow, his Willow, he wheeled to her bedside.

"The doctor said you can get out of bed to visit Giles."

"Yay!" Willow gave a Willowesque squeal of glee. Oz helped her into the wheelchair and turned to Xander.

"So, where's Giles?"

Xander led them down the hall, with Cordelia walking beside him. He stopped in front of the door to one room as a doctor came out.

"Um...hi," Xander said. "I'm the guy who called the ambulance for Giles. Can--can we see him?"

"Of course," the doctor said. "Maybe you can calm him down. Ever since the painkillers kicked in, he's been trying to get out of bed and leave the hospital. He keeps muttering about some old mansion."

"He'll feel better once he sees us," Willow promised. Oz wheeled her into the room.

Giles lay on a bed, looking decidedly uncomfortable in his hospital gown. He had finger braces on several of his fingers and a cut on his forehead, as well as several bruises on his arms. There was one deep cut on his arm that appeared to have been stitched up. He looked up as they entered.

"Willow?" He sounded pleased. "Cordelia. I'm glad to see that the two of you are...intact."

"We're fine," Willow said, though she was beginning to feel a little woozy. "It's you I'm worried about. Angel didn't hurt you too bad, did he?"

For a moment there was an expression of intense pain on Giles's face, an expression filled with nightmares and raw terror. But it was covered up a moment later by a much calmer one, one that kept fear at bay.

"No," Giles lied. "No, he didn't." Giles couldn't tell her about Angel's torture, both the physical tortures like breaking the Watcher's fingers and the mental torture of seeing Jenny alive again only to discover it all a trick. No need to worry her by telling her how he had been only half a moment shy of mad in that foul mansion, how he had nearly died alone in a darkened room because he was too stubborn to tell Angel about the ritual of Acathla. No need to tell her how he had failed Buffy by giving in to Drusilla's tricks.

"That's good," Willow said. "Because you look so-so-"

"Messed up?" Cordelia offered. Both Xander and Willow shot her a look. "What? I was just trying to help."

"I cast the spell, Giles," Willow said, changing the subject. "To restore Angel's soul. I think it worked, too, 'cause....because..." Willow's voice tapered off and she looked about to faint in the chair.

"I think Willow's ready to go back to bed," Oz said. "See you later, Giles. Nice to see you alive." With a calm, Oz-like smile, he wheeled his Willow out of the room.

"I'm gonna go call my parents," Cordelia said suddenly. "I just noticed how late it is. They're gonna wonder where I am."

"You can go home, Cordelia," Giles said. "It won't bother me."

"Yeah, but--" Cordelia broke off uncomfortably. "I want to help."

"You've done enough," Giles assured her. "There's nothing left to do."

"Well....okay," Cordelia assented. She turned to Xander. "Want a ride home?"

"I think Xander should stay here," Giles said before the boy could answer. "I want to ask him a few things about what happened while I was...with Angel."

"Um, okay," Xander said. He gave Cordelia a quick kiss. "I'll call you later," he promised. Cordelia gave a last good-bye and walked off.

"So, what do you want to know?" Xander asked. "'Cause there's not much to tell. Well, except...." Xander was silent for a moment. "Except...Kendra...she's dead."

"Kendra?" Giles's eyes were sad. "Dead?" He shook his head slowly, sadly, thinking of Buffy. "It is....normally an accepted fact that a Slayer may die in the line of duty...but that doesn't make it any easier. She wasn't even a Slayer for very long..." Giles's voice broke off as the Watcher silently grieved for the poor Slayer. He took a deep breath, composing himself. "I'll have to call her Watcher and inform him of Kendra's passing." (And will someone call me soon to tell me that my Slayer has made the ultimate sacrifice for her calling?)

"Yeah..." Xander didn't know what else to say. He glanced down at the floor, then back at Giles. The Watcher gazed back with an expression that reminded Xander ominously of Willow's resolve face.

"Get a doctor," Giles said, his voice tight. "I'm getting out of this bloody place."

"Uh...excuse me? Giles, no offense, but you don't exactly look like you're in top form."

"I don't care. I'm going back to that blasted mansion to check on my Slayer." He sat up with a quick grimace of pain and stared coldly at Xander. "Stop standing there and get a doctor!" he snapped, a bit of Ripper evident in his voice. Xander scurried out of the room and went to find a doctor.

When he returned with a very nervous and rather angry doctor, Giles was already fully clothed in the torn and bloodstained shirt that he been wearing while Angel had tortured him and had put on the glasses stuffed in the pocket.

"Mr.Giles," the doctor said angrily. "You can't possibly be thinking of leaving this hospital so soon after being injured like that and I am telling you that--"

"I am telling you that I'm leaving," Giles broke in. He gave the doctor a gaze that only Ripper could give, a gaze that Giles the librarian would never dream of giving. "You can't keep me here against my will if I'm intent on leaving."

The doctor argued with Giles for a few more minutes, but to no avail. Giles stalked out of the hospital with Xander rushing to keep up.

"The mansion's this way," Xander offered, leading Giles towards where he had left Buffy.

By the time they reached the mansion, it was dark outside, and Xander was thankful for the cross in his pocket, as well as the stake he still had in his other pocket. He glanced at Giles, and thought that the librarian looked a little pale. But it might just have been the streetlights.

The door to the mansion was open. Xander peered into the darkness.

"Hello?" he called. "Anybody home?"

There was no reply, so he entered with Giles at his heels. Giles seemed to be breathing a little quicker than before.

The Watcher followed Xander stiffly, assaulted by a sudden rush of memories.

<"Now...tell me when it hurts."

"How far do you think I can push this finger back before it snaps?"

"Somebody get the chainsaw!"

"I'm going to kill your Slayer...did that hurt?"

"Drusilla...Do you want to play a game?"

"Just tell me what to do...">

Giles shook his head, trying to banish the demons in his mind that surrounded him, stifling his cries and making him feel ill.

"Hey, look, it's demon-guy!" Xander's voice floated in from the main room. Giles peered in, saw Acathla standing in the middle of the room with a sword in his chest. Nothing surrounded the demon but dust.

"Yes, that's--that's Acathla," Giles confirmed. "He appears to be dormant."

"But if he isn't awake...then where's Buffy?" Xander looked to Giles for answers. The Watcher sighed.

"I can't say, Xander. But there's no body, so I suppose we must hope for the best."

"We could call her," Xander suggested. "See if she's home."

"Perhaps tomorrow morning," Giles agreed. He was feeling more nervous by the moment. He hated this place, and he wanted desperately to leave. But not until he was sure that his Slayer was not lying injured somewhere, waiting for his help. "But first, we'll search the rest of the mansion. There may be some clue as to where she's

gone..."

"Gotcha." Xander rushed off to check around. Giles slowly walked towards one of the rooms, the room where he had been tortured. He peered inside.

Everything was just the way it had been when Xander had saved Giles. The chair where the Watcher had been tied up sat in the corner, with the ropes that had bound him lying on the floor beside it. Giles closed his eyes, trying to forget, more than anything else, Drusilla planting the image of Jenny in his mind. Dear, sweet Jenny, taken from him by the same demon that had nearly killed him earlier this day.

"Giles? Giles?" Xander's voice brought the Watcher back to reality. "I didn't find anything. No Buffy, no Angel."

"Yes, well, I suppose we'll have to wait and see if Buffy shows up later," Giles said, wishing fervently that she would. "There's nothing more we can do here. We'd best go. After all, we both have to get to school tomorrow and it's late."

"Oh yeah. School. You know, when the world's about to get sucked into Hell and all, you kinda forget about little details like school."

"Indeed." Giles turned to go, swaying slightly on his feet and wondering momentarily if it wouldn't have been better to stay in the hospital.

Xander, seeing Giles's sudden weakness, immediately went to the librarian's side and helped him outside, deciding that it wasn't time to joke.

As the two exited the mansion, Xander thought that perhaps he saw Buffy, watching him from the bushes near the mansion. But when he stepped towards them to check, there was nobody there.

* * * *

The next morning, Giles and Xander met up with Willow, Oz, and Cordelia in front of the school.

"Willow, are you sure you should be out of bed?" Giles asked Willow.

"Look who's talking," she replied. "Have you guys heard anything?" Xander's mind was still on the missing Buffy.

"No." Willow sounded worried.

"But we know the world didn't end 'cause...check it out," Oz added.

"We went back to the mansion," Giles informed them. "Acathla was dormant."

"I think the spell worked," Willow spoke up. "I felt something...go through me."

"Plus the orb did that cool glow thingy," Cordelia put in.

"Maybe it wasn't in time," Xander said. "Maybe she had to kill him before the cure could work."

"Then I guess she'd want to be alone," Oz said.

"Or maybe Angel was saved and they want to be alone together," Willow said with a smile.

Xander looked down. He hadn't told Buffy about the cure, and he hadn't told anyone that he had lied to her. He wondered if what he had done had been for the best. After all, if Buffy was so busy worrying about Angel's cure, she might have been off guard and gotten killed. But if the cure had somehow worked, and Buffy hadn't known... he tried not to think about that.

"Well, she's gotta show up sometime," Cordelia said. "We still have school."

"Yeah," Willow replied. "She'll be here." She looked as if she was trying to convince herself of this.

Then they all turned and headed inside.

* * * *

Giles was sitting in his office, flipping idly through a book while not really reading it, when he heard the door open. It slammed loudly and loud, angry footsteps sounded in the library. Giles poked his head out of the office door only to find himself face-to-face with none other than Mrs.Summers.

"Where's my daughter? What did you do to her?" Mrs.Summers's face was angry, and her eyes were red, as if she had been crying.

"Excuse me?" Giles wondered if she meant the vampires' attack on the library. "I--I can explain, I'm sure--"

"You've done something to her," Mrs.Summers continued. "Played with her mind somehow, made her think that she's some sort of vampire slayer--"

"She--she told you?" Giles asked.

"I don't know how you did it," Mrs.Summers continued, ignoring him. "It--it had to be mirrors, or-or something. People don't just burst into dust. You changed her, made her think that she had to save the world."

"Please, sit down, Mrs.Summers," Giles said calmly, leading her to a chair. She sat down numbly. "Now, I know that this is hard to believe. But your daughter, Buffy... she is a vampire slayer. You see, there are certain...evils here in Sunnydale. Vampires, demons. And one girl in all the world is the Chosen One, who will lead the fight against these evils. Your daughter is that One. She alone will stand against the demons and the monsters."

"She...she can't be." Mrs.Summers shook her head slowly. "She can't be. You're lying."

"You know I am not," Giles said gently. "Mrs.Summers, I know that this is hard to accept, but it's true."

"But--but why my daughter? Did I do something wrong? Did she? Is this some type of punishment?"

"I assure you, Mrs.Summers, Buffy has not done anything wrong," Giles said. "There is no reason why one girl is a Slayer and others are not. It's...destiny, I suppose. But being the Slayer is not punishment. In some places, it's considered to be quite an honor." He thought sadly of Kendra.

"It's--it's not fair," Mrs.Summers murmured. "Why did it have to be Buffy? Why couldn't it be some other person's daughter? It's not an honor! It made her run away!"

"Run away?" Giles said with a sudden feeling of dread.

"You mean--you didn't know?" Mrs.Summers pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and gave it to him with trembling hands. Giles slowly read the letter.

Dear Mom,

I know that you probably still don't understand the whole 'Slayer' thing. I wish I could explain it to you. I wish I could apologize for what I've done behind your back. But I can't. I have to go away...I can't stay here. Terrible things have happened, like you said. And I think I have to deal with them by myself. Go and see Mr.Giles, the librarian, and he'll explain the Slayer thing. I love you,

Buffy

Giles set the letter on the desk, disbelieving. He shook his head slowly. (Buffy ran away....It's my fault. I should have been there to help her. I shouldn't have told Angel about the ritual...I failed my Slayer. I failed her.)

* * * *

Willow and the other Slayerettes burst into the library just after school was over.

"Buffy wasn't in school!" Willow told Giles, deeply upset. "You don't think that-- she's--"

"Buffy is alive," Giles said, looking pale and tired. "I...heard from her mother this morning. Mrs.Summers now knows that Buffy is the Slayer."

"But if Buffy's alive, where is she?" Oz wondered.

"I don't know." Giles took off his glasses. "Buffy has run away from home. No one knows where she is. I've been on the phone with the Watchers Council for hours, trying to find any leads. None have turned up so far."

"But--she can't be gone!" Willow said desperately. "What about school, and--"

"She's also been expelled," Giles said. "Principal Snyder informed me of that not long ago."

"That little troll!" Xander burst out. "We got Buffy cleared of the murder charges! She's a free man--woman."

"Apparently Principal Snyder didn't see it that way." Giles looked very old all of the sudden.

"But without Buffy, who's going to protect Sunnydale?" Willow questioned.

"We are," Xander said immediately.

"Excuse me? What do you mean by 'we?'" Cordelia asked.

"Don't worry, Cordy," Xander said. "It'll be easy. We set you in front of the vampire, you open your mouth, and boom! He's outta there."

"I think Xander's right," Willow said before Cordelia could start flinging insults back at Xander. "We've watched Buffy slay enough evil things that we could do it."

"And we could get walkie-talkies and everything!" Xander said eagerly. "Just call me...Nighthawk."

"Nighthawk?" Cordelia and the others stared at him. Xander shrugged.

"What?"

2. Default Chapter Title

Disclaimer: Buffy & co. belong to Joss Whedon, blah blah blah etc. Enjoy the fic.

Willow groaned as she rolled out of bed. She'd forgotten what Buffy's nights were like. Lately she had been going to bed a one or later and getting up at seven. It was nine right now, thankfully, so if she ever managed to get herself out of bed she could go straight to the library. Or Giles's. She couldn't remember which one it was today.

Then she remembered suddenly and dashed out of bed, pulling some clothes out of her drawers. Willow had important business today.

Today Giles was going to show them how to slay the demon that had been sighted in Sunnydale twice by the Scooby Gang. And without Buffy, it was up to Willow and the Slayerettes to fight the demon.

She grabbed a quick breakfast, told her parents that she was off to the Bronze to meet Xander and walked out into the streets. She caught sight of many familiar faces from school, but the one face she would have loved to see was nowhere around.

There was still no word on Buffy's whereabouts.

Willow told herself to forget Buffy for a moment, hard as it was to do. She had to have her full concentration if she was going to slay a demon.

Oz was waiting for her when she left her house. Willow skipped over to him, sitting beside him in the van while he drove towards Giles's apartment.

"So we're going to Giles's today?" Willow asked.

"He said he's got some weapons and stuff to show us," Oz replied, nodding. "Xander said he'd meet us there."

"Well, it's close enough to walk," Willow admitted. Xander had limited transportation while Cordelia was on vacation for the summer.

Oz parked in front of Giles's apartment and he and Willow hurried to Giles's apartment. Xander opened the door for them.

"About time you guys got here," he said. "I almost had to listen to the amazing and informative 'demon-lecture' by myself. Oh, and look what I got!" He pulled a walkie-talkie out of his belt. "Neat, huh?"

"Uh, yeah....what's it for?" Willow asked.

"What, don't you see the genius of it?" Xander replied. "You see, with this, we can discuss slaying-type things from long distances. You know, stuff like...slaying. And vampires. Anyway, it's cool. Trust me."

"Xander..." Giles came out of the kitchen, sounding exasperated. He looked better than he had a month earlier; his wounds were almost completely healed. "This is the third time you've mentioned that silly little radio. I told you, you don't need it."

"Sure I do," Xander said. "You'll see."

"So, what do we need to know about this demon?" Willow asked brightly, settling down on the couch with Oz beside her.

"Ah yes, the, uh, the demon." Giles fumbled around in the apartment for a moment before pulling a dusty book out of a box by the wall. He flipped through it a moment until he found the page he wanted. "Here it is." He held the picture out for them to see.

"Whoa. Freaky," Oz said in a rather calm tone.

"It's like some sort of....evil monkey," Willow said.

"Do we kill it with poisoned bananas, then?" Xander asked.

"No." Giles gave him a look.

"That was a rhetorical question," Xander replied. "It was yet another of my witty comments designed to relieve tension among the Scooby Gang."

"That no longer has a Scooby," Willow said morosely.

They were all silent for a moment, thinking of Buffy. Finally Giles spoke again.

"Uh, yes, quite. Now, this demon is named Culpanos. He was believed to have been killed in the late Eighteenth Century, but, apparently, this belief was false. It is also referred to as the 'guilt demon,' for, if it manages to bite you, it can dig into your deepest secrets and use them to cause great feelings of guilt. Culpanos then feeds off that guilt in order to become stronger. Eventually, when its feedings have left the victim in a weakened and vulnerable state, he kills them."

"Well, it won't be feeding off me," Xander said nervously. "Nope, I'm guilt-free. Mr. Guiltless, that's me." He smiled tensely. He still hadn't told his friends about his little lie to Buffy.

"So, how do we stop Culpanos?" Willow turned to look at Giles. She smiled. "Will we need any spells? 'Cause I'm Spell-Girl, you know."

"And I've been meaning to talk to you about that," Giles said. "But we won't be needing any spells. Culpanos can be killed by simply stabbing it in the heart or cutting its head off. Nothing too complicated, providing we can find it."

"I told you this would come in handy." Xander pulled out his walkie-talkie, then picked up a second from the floor where he had set it. "We can split up and communicate using these puppies." He nodded proudly at them all. "Yup, what would you guys do without me?"

"I shudder to think," Giles said dryly.

Willow grabbed one of the walkie-talkies.

"Me and Oz will take this and check the East Side of town," she said. "Xander, you and Giles can check the West. That way, one of us is bound to find Culpanos."

"But not now," Giles said. "Culpanos is very sensitive to light; it won't be out to feed until tonight. Until then, I suggest you all go home a rest up. We'll most likely be up all night."

"What do we do about our parents?" Oz wondered.

"We'll just tell them that we're staying at each other's house," Willow said.

Giles looked about to protest when Xander added,

"Or we could just tell them that we're out hunting demons while the resident Slayer's AWOL."

That quieted Giles.

The Slayerettes filed out with promises to be back before nightfall. Once they were gone, Giles settled himself by the phone the way he

had every day once he was alone.

After all, one never knew when someone would call with word of the Slayer.

* * * *

They met at Giles's house and got sufficiently armed. Giles was understandably nervous at giving them weapons, but he had no choice. He handed Willow a sword and gave Oz a spear.

"You two can manage to work those without harming yourselves, can't you?" he asked tensely.

"Don't worry, Giles." Willow swung the sword experimentally and nearly took Xander's head off. She smiled sheepishly. "I'm sure I'll get the hang of it."

"I shudder at the thought of you two on the streets with those." Giles muttered. He took a sword for himself and was about to give a crossbow to Xander when he thought better of it and gave him an ax instead.

"We'll meet back at the library at midnight and discuss whatever we've seen," Giles said. "Remember, if you see Culpanos, contact me immediately and do not engage it unless you have no other choice. I don't want any of you being hurt. Do you understand?"

"Don't worry, Giles," Willow promised. "Culpanos won't get within three feet of us."

They set out in different directions a few moments later. Willow and Oz walked side by side, trying to be nonchalant with weapons in their hands.

The bushes suddenly rustled by Willow's feet. She jumped back, pointing her sword at the foliage.

"Is it Culpanos?" Oz leaned over to look.

The bushes rustled some more. Suddenly, a cat streaked out of them, running over Willow's feet as it dashed across the street. Willow stumbled backwards in surprise, and Oz caught her.

"It's cool," he said. "After all, I'm sensing major evil vibes from that cat." His voice was sincere.

"Oh, yeah," Willow said, smiling. "Majorly evil."

Xander and Giles skirted the park, Giles checking under the trees and bushes for any signs of Culpanos while Xander played with the walkie-talkie.

"Hey, Will! Nighthawk here. See any evil monkey-things? No? Too bad. No, we're batting zero, too. Wait a second. Oh, my God, it's a demon! Aah! Just kidding." Xander smiled as he continued chatting.

"Give me that!" Giles took the walkie-talkie away and put it in his belt. "Xander, this is a hunt, not-not a party! We have to be quiet if we want to find Culpanos before it finds us."

"Hey, you're the one talking, not me," Xander replied. Suddenly, Giles held up a hand.

"Quiet. I heard something." He inched towards a nearby clearing. "Wait here, Xander. I'll call if I need you."

Giles carefully made his way towards the clearing. The trees to his right rustled as a crow flew out of them, cawing fiercely.

"Watcher."

The voice was breathy, low, so quiet that he almost didn't catch it at first. Then it came again, more insistently.

"Watcher. Come here, Watcher."

"Who's there? Culpanos?" Giles held up his sword, turning around slowly.

Something barreled into him from behind. Giles cried out as he was forced to the ground. There was a searing pain in his shoulder, which felt as though it had been bitten off. The sword fell from his hand.

"Look at you, pathetic Watcher. You have no Slayer. You failed her." A small, wiry demon covered in brown fur clambered off Giles's back, standing in front of him. Its long brown tail whipped back and forth. "You are such a failure, Watcher. You let your Slayer down....you let your Jenny Calendar down. You can never save those you love because you do not love enough."

"I-I will not listen!" Giles mumbled, feeling as though he might black out.

Culpanos darted forward again, biting Giles in the arm.

"You failed them all! You are a worthless waste of breath! You should have let Angelus put you out of your misery!"

"Hey! Mr. Monkey-Demon!" Xander came barreled through the bushes, ax held high. "Eat ax!"

Culpanos hissed and darted away. Xander stood dumbfounded for a moment. Then he heard a branch break behind him, and dodged to the side just as Culpanos attacked. The demon managed to nip his leg.

"You lied to your friend." Culpanos turned on Xander. "You never told your friend Buffy about the spell that would have restored her Angel's soul. You caused her to run away."

"What?!" Willow's voice caused Xander to glance backwards, remembering belatedly that the walkie-talkie was still on. Willow and Oz had heard every word.

"I--I was trying to help her," Xander muttered, stumbling backwards.

"You still lied. She would be safe if not for you. Look what you have done." Culpanos dived at Xander, knocking him through the bushes and into the road.

A car barreled down upon him, honking loudly. Xander looked up dazedly, then rolled away at the last second. He stared after the car for a second, then lurched to his feet, stumbling back to the park.

All that was left were the forgotten ax and sword...and a small pool of drying blood. Both Giles and Culpanos were nowhere to be seen.

Sighing tiredly, Xander hung his head and began the long walk back to the library.

Willow and Oz were waiting when he got back. Willow was shaking her head, looking devastated.

"Will, I--" Xander started to say.

"Xander, how could you?" Willow turned and ran out of the library. Xander followed her.

"Willow, please!" She stopped halfway down the hall.

"Why? Why didn't you tell her?" Willow asked. "I trusted you! She trusted you! And you-you threw it away because you were--jealous! If only you'd told her..."

"I didn't--It wasn't like that!" Xander went to her. "Will, I know this looks bad, but--I couldn't tell her. I was afraid that--that if I told her, she wouldn't fight her hardest. And then she'd be killed...and it would be all my fault."

"I don't believe you." Willow turned away. "You wanted her to kill Angel, so you d-didn't tell her a-a-and--"

"I wanted to tell her!" Xander burst out. "But I knew I couldn't! I-I was afraid for her. I didn't want Angel to hurt her anymore. And the only way to make sure that that didn't happen was to lie to her. I didn't want to....betray you guys. I'm sorry, Will. Really. I'm....sorry that I betrayed your trust."

"If you really wanted to help, why didn't you tell me?" Willow turned on him. "Why didn't you just tell me this before? Were you ever going to tell me? Or are you just making this up because the evil monkey gave away your secret?"

"I was gonna tell you eventually," Xander said. "But after Buffy left and all, it didn't seem like a good idea. I didn't want everyone to get mad at me or...blame me for her running away. I-I was afraid, Will. I don't want to lose you guys as my friends."

"If you had just told us...." Willow's voice trailed off. "I'd be a lot less angry if I had heard it from you instead of from a demon monkey. And I'd believe you more about wanting to help Buffy if you hadn't hidden it."

"I'm sorry, Will," Xander said. "How many times do I have to

apologize?" He paused for a moment. "Just round off the number and I'll say it as many times as you want. Anything to make you stop being mad at me."

"I'm not mad," Willow said. "Well, not really mad. But I still wish you would have told me. I'm your friend. We've been best friends since first grade. You know you can tell me anything, no matter how bad. I just wish you would've trusted me with this."

"I promise, I'll never do anything like this again," Xander told her. "And if I ever do screw up again, you'll be the first one who knows."

"That's all I ask." Willow smiled slightly. "I guess I kinda forgive you now. I know you would never intentionally hurt Buffy, no matter how much you hate Angel."

"Thanks Will," Xander said sincerely.

"So, what did you and Giles find?" Willow asked. "Is he mad at you, too?"

Xander was silent for a moment.

"Uh, Willow? I think I screwed up again."

Giles woke up with spots clouding his eyes and pain in his shoulder. He blinked several times to clear his vision, then blinked again in surprise when he realized where he was. In the basement of the old factory where Spike and Drusilla had once lived. Drusilla's dolls were still on the nearby table and Giles was chained by his ankle to the post of an old Victorian bed that had once been Drusilla's as well.

After taking stock of his surroundings, Giles took stock of his condition. There was a manacle around his ankle that held him tightly to the bedpost. His shoulder was crusted in dried blood and throbbed painfully, and there was a small bite on his other arm that also had some dried blood on it. Interestingly enough, despite all that had happened to him, he had managed to keep his glasses intact.

The door creaked above him and he glanced up as Culpanos slunk in. The demon smiled wickedly, its little red eyes glowing and its fangs bared.

"Good day, Watcher. Are you ready to be fed on once more?"

"Culpanos," Giles groaned. "Am I to be your personal buffet, then?"

"Indeed." The demonic red eyes glowed happily. "You have guilt to spare, Watcher. I will enjoy the pain of bringing it out."

Giles stared at the creature a moment. Then something in him snapped, something that was tired of being a victim and was sick of torment. Giles kicked Culpanos suddenly, sending the beast several feet backwards. Giles grabbed a poker that had been propped beside the bed and swung it at the attacking demon.

"You have fire, Watcher!" Culpanos screeched, fur sticking up in rage. It dived at Giles, but the Watcher was too quick. The poker hit Culpanos square in the stomach, throwing it backwards.

Some demons would have punished Giles horribly for such impudence and wouldn't have stopped attacking until successful. Culpanos was not one of those demons. It scurried up the steps, well out of Giles's reach. Culpanos hissed once, like a cat, then darted out the door.

Giles stared up at the closed door for a moment, then sank tiredly to the floor, still clutching the poker tightly.

Meanwhile, back in the library, Willow, Oz, and Xander flipped through Giles's books, trying to find anything that could help them discover where Culpanos was hiding Giles.

"I don't think this book's even in English," Xander muttered, throwing it onto the table. "This isn't working very well, Willow."

"I know," Willow said sadly, fiddling with her walkie-talkie.

"Wait a sec," Oz said. He looked at Xander. "Doesn't Giles still have the other walkie-talkie?"

"You're right!" Xander exclaimed. "We can just contact him with this radio and ask where he is."

"I just hope it's still turned on," Willow said. She turned on her walkie-talkie and spoke tentatively into it. "Giles?"

A weak voice answered her.

"Willow?"

"Giles!" Willow jumped up in happiness. "Where are you? We'll come and get you."

"I'm in the old factory," Giles replied. "But I don't want you coming down here--"

"We're on our way!" Willow switched the radio off and picked up her sword.

"Come on. We'll take my van," Oz said, taking hold of his spear as Xander gleefully took hold of the ax.

"Let's go kick some demon butt!" Xander said. Willow and Oz stared at him for a moment. "Yeah, I know it's kinda cliché, but, hey, it sounds cool, right?"

Several minutes later Oz pulled up in front of the factory.

"There it is," he said.

"Let's go!" Xander prepared to step out of the van. Willow stopped him.

"Wait! We can't just...rush in!"

"Why not? We've got weapons and attitude. What else could we need?"

"A plan," Willow replied.

"I'm assuming you have one?"

"Actually....no." Willow smiled sheepishly. "But...let's just try to sneak in, okay? We don't want to attract Culpanos's attention."

"Whatever you say, Commander." Xander gave an exaggerated salute as he headed towards the factory.

The three Slayerettes positioned themselves just outside the door, weapons in hand. Oz put his ear to the door.

"Hear anything?" Xander asked.

"No. It's quiet," Oz told him. Suddenly, he held up a hand. "Wait. I hear something....it sounds like an animal."

"It must be Culpanos!" Willow said, gripping her sword. "Let's go!"

"You know, it could be a little bunny or something, in which case we're going to look pretty stupid rushing in with swords and stuff," Xander commented as he pushed the door open.

There was an animalistic hiss, and Xander was suddenly knocked down by a brown furry shadow. Culpanos opened his mouth, his sharp teeth pointed at Xander's face. Xander screamed.

Oz dived forward, pulling the demon off Xander. As Culpanos turned to face him, Willow jumped behind it. Raising her sword, she plunged it into the demon's back.

Culpanos screeched loudly and turned to face her. It stumbled a few steps towards her, then collapsed, dead.

"That--that was easy," Xander panted, pulling himself to his feet. "We did pretty good. Oz with the grabbing of the demon, Willow with the stabbing of the demon, and me--"

"With the screaming?" Oz suggested.

"That was a bellow," Xander corrected. "I was bravely using myself as bait so that you guys could finish off the evil monkey."

"Very clever tactic, that," Oz said, nodding. "I never would have guessed."

"Come on." Willow slipped inside the factory. "We've gotta find Giles!"

"He's probably in the basement," Oz said as he and Xander followed Willow inside.

Giles looked up as the door opened. His grip on the poker tightened,

then slackened as he recognized Willow, Oz, and Xander coming down the stairs.

"Giles! Are you okay?" Willow hurried up to him as Xander and Oz looked for the keys to the manacle around Giles's ankle.

"Well, I've--I've been better," Giles replied. "But I am intact. Have you taken care of Culpanos?"

"Yeah, Will killed him," Xander said as he walked up with the key and began to free Giles. He set the manacles on a nearby table.

"I wonder what Spike and Drusilla used those for?" Willow wondered aloud.

"I think wondering about that would send me to a scary visual place," Xander replied. "Let's get going before that happens, shall we?"

"That sounds like a very good idea," Giles replied, touching his shoulder and wincing. "I'm afraid it's back to the hospital for me."

The Slayerettes helped him out of the factory towards the van, stopping first to let Giles look at Culpanos.

"It, uh, it does appear to be dead," Giles said. "We'll have to take it with us and bury it somewhere later, lest someone find its body and start asking questions."

"Take it with us?" Xander stared at Giles. "Can I just say, ew?"

"Well, we can't leave it here," Giles said. "Xander, would you bring it to the van please?"

Xander opened his mouth, then shut it again. For once, he had nothing to say.

3. Default Chapter Title

Same disclaimer as usual. Nobody's mine. Read fic. Enjoy.

Giles entered the library, sighing heavily. Xander, Willow, and Oz looked up as he entered.

"Another dead end?" Willow questioned.

"Not quite. I did find some vampires...but no Slayer. I took care of the vampires, but..."

"But you're not any closer to finding Buffy," Xander finished.

"Yes," Giles agreed. "And how have you three been doing in the vampire department?"

"Oh, we got one!" Willow said enthusiastically. She added proudly, "Oz staked it."

"Yeah, we keep this up, soon we'll be getting, what, six out of ten?" Xander added. "I'd say we're getting better."

"Well, considering that we were getting zero out of ten, I'd say that this is a definite improvement," Oz put in.

"I'm sure you've all been doing your best," Giles said. "But I admit, I'd feel much better if Buffy was here. I may not be your Watcher, but I am still responsible for all of you."

"Hey, you don't need to worry about us," Xander said. "We're the Slayerettes! The Slayer's trusty second-in-commands! We can slay everything from demons to principals without batting an eye!"

"But we don't usually slay principals," Willow added, on the off chance that Principal Snyder might be hiding somewhere nearby.

"So, G-man, you coming to our big party tonight?" Xander asked.

"Uh...party?" Giles looked at him in confusion.

"We're having a big weapons-cleaning party to ring in the new school year," Willow explained.

"Yep, it'll be chock full of party mix and weapons polish," Xander added. "A tempting blend that cooks up any party."

"I-I think not," Giles replied. "Though you're welcome to use the library for your, uh, party. I need to get home, you-you never know when someone might call with news of the Slayer."

"Thanks Giles," Willow said, looking worried. "Are you sure you don't want to come? I mean...we don't want you to be lonely."

"I'll be perfectly fine, Willow," Giles said. "Thank you for your concern, though. Now, I-I really must be going."

He turned and left the library.

Night fell. The only lights on in Sunnydale High were one hall light and the ones in the library. The door was locked with a "Do Not Disturb" sign, just in case the janitor arrived to look over the school before it opened for the new school year, which was only a few weeks away.

Inside the library, Oz, Xander, and Willow were busily shining Giles's weapons.

"The key to slaying," Xander said, "is not strength, or speed. The key to good slayage, my friends, is a shiny weapon. Think of how embarrassing it would be if we tried to kill some big evil thing with a dirty weapon."

"It might mock us and our dirty weapons," Oz said.

"Exactly!" Xander agreed. "It might say something like 'na na na na na, you've got a filthy weapon,' which would get us mad and throw us off-balance. But all that can be avoided with just a little bit of

spit and polish. Speaking of which, that crossbow looks like it could use some polish."

"You just want to touch it," Willow accused, pulling the crossbow closer. "Giles told me not to let you have it."

"Aw, come on, Will!" Xander said. "Give it here! I'll just polish, I promise! No target practice or anything!"

"No," Willow said, sticking out her tongue at him.

"She's very overprotective," Oz told Xander.

"No fair." Xander picked up one of Giles's swords and walked behind Willow. He pressed the sword against her hair.

"Ha! Now, give me the crossbow or get a haircut!"

"You wouldn't dare!" Willow said. "You're not getting this crossbow."

"Come on," Xander pleaded. He lowered his voice to make it mock-menacing. "Give it to me or I will suck your blood! Blah blah!"

"Xander." Willow rolled her eyes. "You can't have it."

"Don't make me use this sword," Xander warned.

"You won't," Willow said. "You're too chicken. 'Cause if you use it, I might have to use this crossbow...on you."

"Oh yeah?" Before he could think about what he was doing, Xander sliced through Willow's long hair. He stared at it in shock. "Oops. Sorry, Will."

"Xander!" Willow stared at him, mortified. "Look what you did to my hair! Now I'll have to get it all cut short!"

"I think it'll look nice that way," Oz spoke up. "You'll look even cuter."

"You really think so?" Willow asked.

"Definitely," Xander said quickly. "You should thank me."

"Maybe go to a stylist...." Willow continued.

"Great idea," Xander agreed.

"And because you cut it, Xander, you get to pay for it," Willow added.

"Wonderful idea," Xander said. Then he stopped for a moment, realizing what he'd agreed to. "No. Not good idea. Bad, bad, horrible idea."

"Good idea." Willow smiled at him and sat back down. She picked up the crossbow and started polishing again.

Xander walked back over to his chair and sat down, turning the sword in his hands.

"I still want the crossbow."

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Pretty please?"

"No."

* * * *

Giles sat in his apartment by the phone, waiting for it to ring. He sighed heavily, taking off his glasses to clean them.

Suddenly the phone rang. He dropped his glasses on the couch and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?" His hopes rose, only to be dashed moments later.

"Is Larry there?" asked an unfamiliar voice.

"No...no, you have the wrong number," Giles said, and hung up.

He reached down and picked up his glasses, putting them back on. He glanced at the clock. Almost midnight.

"I should go to bed," he muttered, but didn't get up. He wanted to be awake in case anyone called.

The phone rang again and Giles picked it up. This time, the voice on the other end was familiar.

"Giles? Are you still awake?" It was Willow.

"I was about to go to bed," Giles lied. "Is there a problem?"

"No....well, we ran out of polish and Xander cut my hair with a sword, but we're okay. We just wanted to see if you were still waiting for calls."

"I'm all right Willow," Giles assured her. "You don't need to be worried about me. Now, shouldn't you three be at home?"

"We were...just about to leave," Willow said. "Good night."

"Yes, good night, Willow." Giles hung up. He stretched himself out on the couch, staring at the ceiling. The clock ticked behind him, counting off the minutes. He listened to it, feeling drowsy. Before he knew it, he had closed his eyes and fallen asleep.

About ten minutes later the door creaked open. Giles had given the Slayerettes a key to his apartment in case of emergencies, and now they were using it. Willow, Oz, and Xander entered the apartment

quietly, staring at Giles asleep on the couch.

"He really misses Buffy, doesn't he?" Xander said quietly, oddly serious.

Willow went up the steps to Giles's bedroom and came down with a blanket.

"We all miss Buffy," she said softly, draping the blanket over Giles. "He's got to be exhausted."

"We'd better go before we wake him up," Oz added.

"Yeah..." Willow said. "Good night, Giles."

The three of them turned and left the apartment. They turned off the lights while Giles slept on.

End
file.